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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 28 May 2015

Session 4

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)
*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
*Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
*Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Gordon Adam (Royal Society of Edinburgh)
Bruce Adamson (Scottish Human Rights Commission)
Alison Cairns (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)
Andrew Campbell (Forth Valley College)
Anne Cant (Dundee and Angus College)
Dugald Craig (West of Scotland Colleges Partnership)
Julie Hepburn (Amnesty International)
David Hope-Jones (Scotland Malawi Partnership)
George Hotchkiss (West Lothian College)
Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance)
Emma Meredith (Edinburgh College)
Margaret Munckton (Perth College)
Shona Pettigrew (New College Lanarkshire)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 28 May 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:04]

Connecting Scotland Inquiry

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2015 of the European and External Relations Committee. As usual, I request that mobile phones be switched off or switched to silent. We have received apologies from Anne McTaggart.

Agenda item 1 is two round-table discussions for our inquiry on connecting Scotland, the first of which is with the college sector. It is very apt that our meeting is taking place in the David Livingstone room, given that we are talking about Scotland's connections with the rest of the world and those whom we view as our friends.

I will go round the table and get everyone to introduce themselves. I am the committee convener.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I am the deputy convener of the committee.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I am the MSP for Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley.

Andrew Campbell (Forth Valley College): I am international development manager at Forth Valley College.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I am the MSP for North East Fife.

Dugald Craig (West of Scotland Colleges Partnership): I am acting chief executive of West of Scotland Colleges Partnership.

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am the MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

Shona Pettigrew (New College Lanarkshire): I am head of external funding and international business development at New College Lanarkshire.

Emma Meredith (Edinburgh College): I am international director at Edinburgh College.

Anne Cant (Dundee and Angus College): I am international manager at Dundee and Angus College.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am a Highlands and Islands MSP.

Margaret Munckton (Perth College): I am the principal and chief executive of Perth College, University of the Highlands and Islands.

George Hotchkiss (West Lothian College): I am assistant principal at West Lothian College.

The Convener: I welcome all of you to the committee, and I thank you for your written evidence. Indeed, we are gathering a huge stock of written evidence on this topic. It has inspired a lot of people to write to us, for which we are grateful.

Instead of simply asking witnesses for evidence, we will be using the round-table method of discussion to try to make the conversation as free-flowing as possible. However, if you want to speak, please catch my eye and channel your comments through me so that we can have some kind of order. I do not expect all of you to jump in, but if you do as I have indicated, I can flag up comments a wee bit more.

Hanzala Malik is the first to go.

Hanzala Malik: Good morning and welcome to the meeting. In the past, I have been keen to encourage overseas students to come to study at our universities and colleges but I know that recently students have had difficulties with immigration. How has that affected the number of students that you have coming from overseas? Has it impacted on your financial situation as well as the topics that you might have been able to offer?

Margaret Munckton: Perth College UHI is part college, part university. When we offer higher education programmes, we operate as a university and when we offer further education, we operate as a college, so we straddle both sectors.

We had built up an amazing partnership with Andhra Pradesh in India and were getting streams of Indian students who aspired to be aircraft engineers, because India was investing in its aircraft industry. We were getting more than 200 students a year studying our aircraft engineering degree, which was helping both the Indian economy and our economy.

However, we then became subject to changes under tier 4 United Kingdom Border Agency—now UK Visas and Immigration—post-study work visas. Given that the Indian continent is pretty poor, we had to discount the fees heavily. However, because we were then only receiving the same for an international Indian student as we were for a home student, there was no premium for us.

We truly sought to be international and to have diversity on our campus. The students came to us

from year 2 onwards; they would do the first year of their degree in India and years 2, 3 and 4 at Perth. The Perth economy got very used to having a lot of Indian students around. They are very respectful and positive young people, and their families have to save incredibly hard for the money that they use to vouch for the fact that the students are funded to live in this country. The families had to make major sacrifices to send their sons—it was mainly their sons but I am pleased to say that we had some daughters, too—to study in Scotland.

A significant part of the equation was the ability of the students to work for two years after their degree, when they could contribute to our economy as well as undertake further useful learning to get their European Aviation Safety Agency part 66 licence, which would license them to work as engineers back in India. That not only added value to their degree but allowed them to earn money to pay back their parents.

All of a sudden, however, in July one year, the UKVI—I think that it was then the UKBA—said that it wanted an additional £3,000 deposit from Indian families. In other words, the families had not only to vouch for their children being able to pay their fees and to afford to live in Scotland for the years that they were studying but to put in a £3,000 bond. It was a step too far, and those who were in the pipeline dropped out. I understand the immigration dilemma in the country, but students are not part of it.

Hanzala Malik: That might be where the problem lies: we are classing students as immigrants, which is a totally different category altogether. A lot would be changed if that category were to be reclassified.

I am not sure about other colleges but we in Glasgow seem to be suffering similar experiences, and it is important that we get feedback from colleges to verify whether that is indeed an issue.

Margaret Munckton: After 2015-16, we have no pipeline from the partnerships. It simply does not work. We have gone from having more than 200 students coming through the universities, as well as some direct spot entries, to having no students in 2016-17. We will have no progressing students and no new students from India.

Hanzala Malik: Is the experience in other colleges similar?

Shona Pettigrew: I would just reiterate what Margaret Munckton has said. Our international student recruitment is reactive, because of the difficulties that have been described. I also know that South Lanarkshire College in my region had a large number of international students in the past, but it is facing the same issues.

Dugald Craig: Those examples highlight a strategic problem and the need for the Government and the Parliament to work in partnership with the sector to progress the issue.

I am the only college-based member of the UK team of European higher education area experts, which is tasked with the role of promoting better international engagement for the HE sector. As you will know, the HE sector includes colleges; in fact, colleges account for 25 per cent of the UK's HE sector. Over the next 18 months, a team of us will be going around the UK, encouraging institutions to engage more effectively at an international level to increase the number of students who are coming in for short-cycle, degree, masters and PhD programmes. That message is being driven by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. At the same time, however, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is making it difficult for people to get visas to get into the country.

The other frustrating bit is that a big pot of money is available under the Erasmus+ programme. That money, which is called international credit mobility, supports the development of relationships between institutions in the UK and the rest of the world and funds things such as sending staff and students out of the UK and bringing other staff and students into the UK. As I have said, a strategic issue needs to be addressed, and we as a sector need the Government and the relevant civil servants to fight that case for us.

Emma Meredith: On recruitment, I agree with the comments about the reduction in student numbers in the college sector not only in Scotland but in England and Wales. That is probably also evidenced by the number of colleges without a tier 4 licence, because the risks involved in student recruitment are too high in comparison with the numbers that they can recruit safely.

Many colleges have had to change the markets in which they operate because a number of them are deemed to be high risk. That is very unfortunate, but it is the position that we are in. That is the immigration policy. It is therefore a non-negotiable part of international activity that you have to work within the tier 4 parameters—and work within them very carefully if you want to retain your licence. Until that policy changes, I do not see the number of international students coming to the college sector in Scotland growing. That is a huge shame, given the worldwide rise in the need for the kind of vocational skills and training that we are best placed to offer.

09:15

We should also recognise that college student applicants are treated differently from university applicants. It is very hard to evidence how and exactly why that happens, but the number of student applicants who go for a tier 4 credibility interview, for example, is pretty high in the college sector.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that student recruitment is only one part of the international activity in which colleges can engage. Many colleges will have changed their strategy to engage in, for example, Erasmus+ projects and vocational and professional training. That is a huge source of potential growth for the college sector. Student recruitment should remain part of our strategies, but the college sector has a lot more to offer and we can deliver a lot more work.

Jamie McGrigor: I am interested in discussing with the witnesses how they can achieve better international engagement and the difficulties in that respect. In its submission, the West of Scotland Colleges Partnership says:

"it is notable that, with the exception of WoSCoP's support to its member colleges, there is no overarching European or international engagement strategy for the college sector."

It recognises

"that the leadership of such a strategy should be vested in the Regional Chairs but it should also take due cognisance of the Cabinet Secretary's Guidance for colleges"

and it also says:

"the absence of such a strategic approach limits the sector's capacity to generate as significant a European and international impact on skills and learning as its expertise should permit."

How much do you rely on the cabinet secretary's guidance? Does everybody think that they should be guided by the cabinet secretary? How can we improve things so that you can get more international engagement?

Dugald Craig: Colleges have a responsibility to follow the cabinet secretary's guidance; indeed, that is how the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council directs funding. That colleges have a responsibility to meet the regional outcome agreements is a given and part of their daily operation.

Jamie McGrigor: Are you suggesting that there is no guidance?

Dugald Craig: No. I am suggesting that unlike other sectors such as health, universities and enterprise, the college sector has a pretty diverse set of aspirations. I agree with Emma Meredith: this should not just be about international student recruitment. There are other things that we can do, but we do not have a collective strategy to take things forward.

We should compare the Scottish college sector with the Northern Irish college sector, which recognised that it was quite far behind in international engagement. As a consequence, the Northern Ireland Executive developed a strategy to support college efforts to improve their international engagement and engaged with colleges on it. It also provided some funding—a fairly modest £40,000 or £50,000 a year for two or three years.

In order to build relationships with other countries and to influence external funding streams that can support the college sector in being more effective, we need representation on the relevant committees. Because I work with the university and college sectors, I know that Scottish Government civil servants who work for the university sector on international engagement and things like that are pretty well aware of and engage with all the opportunities and forums that can influence opportunities in that respect. We do not enjoy the same level of engagement from the civil servants who are responsible for the college sector side of things. I see some colleagues nodding their heads, which I take to be a sign of agreement.

We need a strategy that is driven by the Scottish Government and which helps us articulate a vision of where we want to go, and we should set targets in terms of not only numbers but the quality of things that we would like to do and, perhaps, the countries with which we want to engage. Such a strategy would need to be resourced. There are good examples in Sweden, Finland and Northern Ireland that show that a fairly modest investment can start to make quite significant differences.

Margaret Munckton: There is another barrier to our international engagement. There is no limit to our aspirations to be effective and to engage internationally, but the colleges have been reclassified by the Office for National Statistics and we are now regarded as arm's-length bodies of central Government. That restricts the uses that we can make of commercially generated income. I am not saying that we all engage in international activity only to earn commercial income, but it is a nice sideline and benefit of true internationalisation of our curriculum, our economy and the social fabric of the colleges.

The current situation is that, if we generate commercial income, we have to spend it in the year in which it is generated, so we cannot use it for longer-term investment purposes. That means that we act like chickens without heads and try to get rid of the money quickly in order not to lose it. The alternative under the restrictions that now apply to us as arm's-length organisations is that

we can sterilise the cash that we gain from commercial activity, which includes international fees, by transferring it to arm's-length foundations and bringing it back out again. The complications that are arising are hampering our ambition and putting us in a box from which we are desperately trying to escape.

It is not that we disagree with the classification; it is that we disagree with the fixes that have been put in place by the Government. It still wants us to engage internationally and generate commercial income, but there is no joined-up thinking about how we can usefully reinvest that money in our college premises for the benefit of all our students, which is why we were trying to generate income in the first place. That puts a different complexion on the anxiety that is being caused by the amount of millions that are sitting in arm's-length foundations. Most of that was generated over the years by colleges that were looking at what they were doing as a long-term strategy of investing in the campuses for the benefit of all students, paid for by their international activity.

I want to challenge WOSCOP's statement about the lack of strategy. It is fair to say that the college sector has undergone radical change since 2013. Colleges Scotland, the overarching agency, has indeed been in the throes of radical change. We are just getting there in terms of joining up the efforts of the sector and the overarching agency.

The board of Colleges Scotland is comprised mainly of regional leads who Michael Russell appointed when he was the cabinet secretary in order to sort out the college sector. One of those, a great guy who was affiliated to the University of St Andrews, led an international working group. The annex of the paper that you have from Colleges Scotland shows that the early work that was done to pull us all together, led by Stephen Magee, established principles with which we could develop a coherent strategy.

Life moved on, and those regional leads went through a public appointment process and became regional chairs, and they now form the Colleges Scotland board. The idea of international activity has not been lost. The focus on it has been dented by UKVI and by our reclassification, but the corporate affairs committee of Colleges Scotland has a grip on the future international strategy for colleges in Scotland. That is where we are. We have had a lot to do, and the idea of international activity has quite rightly been deprioritised, because we are doing all sorts of other things just now to act as a coherent sector.

I will give you another example of the impact of the current restrictions under UKVI. We have a separate limited company called Air Service Training (Engineering) Ltd. The college bought the company in 2000, when it was going belly up—due to the changes that ONS made to our classification, we would not be able to do so now. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of Perth College; it has nothing to do with the university. It has been trading internationally for 85 years, training aircraft engineers and pilots across the world. Recently, it won a Queen's award for enterprise in recognition of its international activity. Two representatives from the company will be going to Buckingham Palace to receive the award. I am wearing the badge on my lapel—it is quite tiny. We are proud on behalf of the college sector of having earned the award for international business—even though, quite rightly, the award was won under the name of Air Service Training (Engineering) Ltd.

The company currently has a contract with Libya. As you know, the situation in Libya is extremely complex just now, but that has not deterred AST. The Scottish Government wants us to support the Libyan Government in Tripoli—there are a few Libyan Governments just now, but we know which one the Scottish Government wants us to support and we are working with it. We have signed a contract for 46 Libyan engineers and 40 pilots, and the contract involves two years-worth of training at commercial fees. The essence is that we want to re-establish the skilled workforce in Libya, which has taken quite a dent recently, because trained engineers and pilots are essential to rebuilding its oil and gas industry. The work helps the Libyan Government and it also helps us, because it provides commercial income.

We have signed agreements, but we are not that daft—we did not put anything in place until the Libyan Government paid the money. We asked for money up front and eventually got £480,000—the fees for one year of training. We received that on 28 March and, under ONS rules, we had to get rid of it by 31 March. In order to keep a hold of it, we had to transfer it to our arm's-length organisation.

On top of those fees, each student is being supported to the tune of £1,200 a month for living allowances. We had to secure student accommodation for them, too. Dundee had overexpanded its university accommodation, and we are about to sign an agreement to use spare capacity in the city. We will be transporting the students daily, because they will be studying from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday—that is their work ethic, anyway. They will be gaily occupied, not roaming the streets. We will pay for their transport to and from Perth every day. The location is beside the mosque in Dundee. We have to look after them socially, pastorally and educationally, and we have employed an extra member of staff to be their mentor on the street, so to speak.

09:30

We are able to do that only because of the company's ambition and track record across the world. It trades in Africa, Indonesia and all over Europe. We have a second site in Karachi, which we had to fight the Civil Aviation Authority on.

Therefore, there is very interesting and well-hidden international activity by the college sector that is not talked about. We are not supposed to be doing it, because we do not have the financial framework and the status to be able to do it well.

Andrew Campbell: I want to pick up on the student complexities in relation to UKVI and to give a perspective from Forth Valley College on where we are in our international journey.

We are relatively new to the arena, but we have an absolutely fantastic proposition for an international market. Our strategy, which was launched just recently, focuses on business and commercial engagement—a bit like the projects that Margaret Munckton referred to—and on student recruitment and mobility, which Dugald Craig mentioned.

How we engage in the timing of that is fairly significant. The recruitment is pretty much backloaded. We are very reactive to any applications purely because of the risks involved. The reputational risks are absolutely huge and they impact daily on our business engagement aspirations. If we speak to any international partner abroad, their first question will be whether we have highly trusted sponsor status and whether we are able to help it with the visa requirements. If the answer is no straight away, it will move on, regardless of the proposition.

That clearly indicates for us that there is a real barrier from UKVI and in the requirements and the onus that are put on colleges to ensure that the applications that they take forward will be ticked off at the Home Office. We have no real control over that. That is why we will remain reactive with our international applications and not invest heavy funds into going abroad and trying to recruit international students. To pick up what Emma Meredith said, that is to the detriment of the college sector as a whole. The benefits of the international dimension for any college or institution far outweigh any negatives in the Home Office.

The international projects that we are involved in with our business engagement are predominantly to do with oil and gas and engineering. Obviously, we are finely placed in Grangemouth. We currently work with a host of global brands in the UK, and we are extending that work. We work with BP in Oman, and we have a meeting next week with Sonangol from Angola and a couple of oil companies from Ghana. What we are trying to do is minimise the risks for us. If we can get a company to sponsor a student rather than go to the open market for student recruitments, that will improve the chances. That is one strategy that we are working on.

I will rewind slightly and talk about how we built our strategy and the stakeholders that we have consulted. We span three local authority areas—those of Clackmannanshire Council, Stirling Council and Falkirk Council. Each of those local authorities bought in and contributed to our strategy. That is in keeping with citywide strategies, as well. We have also brought in the Scottish Government policy team to find out exactly what it is doing and what steer it could give us in building our strategy. The exporting body Scottish Development International was involved at the very early stages, as well.

On the initial question whether we could be doing more, I am a great believer in collaboration, but I am not seeing it happening in the college sector. If it does happen, it happens very quietly; we do not seem to shout about it. Meanwhile, our higher education counterparts have the connected Scotland brand, which provides a great opportunity to market the sector to the international student recruitment market. It would be great if there were something similar for the college sector. It might be on the agenda, but I have not heard anything about it.

The Convener: We invited Colleges Scotland to the meeting, but it thought it better to send representatives from colleges, which is why you are all here. Nevertheless, we hear what you are saying loud and clear.

Anne Cant: First, with regard to international recruitment, I would say from Dundee and Angus College's point of view that the process has certainly been organic. We have not gone out and jointly promoted anything, but over the past six months we have decided to collaborate with both of the city universities to ensure that when we represent our region we can show students that they can have a full and wonderful educational experience, with links being made where we have joint accreditation on certain courses.

Secondly, Dundee and Angus College has a very cohesive international and European strategy, which we have had to put in place given our engagement with more than 21 European projects that span Erasmus+, Interreg and mobility projects. I can give the committee some positive rather than negative feedback on this: as a result of the projects, we have been able to build up collaboration with partners who have assisted us time and again in identifying regional issues that are common to us all and finding ways of working collectively to transfer knowledge and to

understand and disseminate best practice throughout our regions.

More important, this is about embedding that learning into our curriculum to ensure that best practices and learning techniques are kept up to date and that our youngsters have the full range of academic, social and personal vocational training they need to be able to go into the workplace. Our collaboration brings industry into the curriculum, and because it is telling us what it needs there should be no reason why our students cannot get employment.

With regard to mobility projects, which have given our students the opportunity to go to other countries, our college has benefited from the Scottish saltire scholarship. Having personally taken two groups of students to study and work in the United States, I can tell the committee that the feedback that I received from them was that the visit enabled them to understand that the challenges that they face are the same for all students, no matter where they are, and that they have to work together, remember that our borders are smaller and think globally, not locally. It raised their aspirations and was life changing.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Dugald Craig: I want to make four very quick points.

First, I think that Andrew Campbell's remarks underline my own point about the absence of a strategy. I have worked in international education long enough to remember the formation of Scotland's polytechnic colleges group in the 1990s. The six main colleges that did international work attempted to collaborate, but because of the way in which incorporated colleges had to function we could collaborate only at a surface level. As soon as we got into a room, we found ourselves competing against each other. That is why I think any such strategy must have Government involvement.

The structure of the sector means that we are now responding to regional agendas, and each of our colleges has significant and unique strengths that are really relevant to today's world. The universities have done well in international engagement, because people want to buy and access our higher education, but a huge demand for quality vocational training is emerging in what are known as the CIVETS countries—Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa—the emerging 11 or whatever you want to call them, and the colleges are best placed to deliver that training.

One problem is that, although everyone knows what a school is and what a university is, there is no global equivalent of what a college is here. In WOSCOP, we have tried to tackle that by ensuring that every one of our colleges has an Erasmus charter for higher education, because everyone in the world knows what that is and it gets a college through the door.

My second point is that a false and harmful distinction persists in the sector between what is European and what is international. There are at least a dozen European Union programmes that have a global reach and offer funding of up to 100 per cent. I have looked at some of the evidence from other people following the first call for evidence. One of the bodies was saying that it had helped a university to develop a joint or double degree. I hoped that we did not put money into that, because that could all be funded directly by European money.

There are opportunities, but we need to influence how the money is awarded, and that has to be done at a strategic level. That means that the Scottish Government has to ensure that we get seats on the committees that influence funding. The health and enterprise departments have been doing that well, and the transport department did well with the Interreg programmes. We need people to do that for us in the college sector, not just for the university sector.

Thirdly, we need to acknowledge the points Margaret Munckton made that we do not have the funding now to be opportunistic and to develop things as much as we would like to. By the same token, because of the ONS classification, any money that we do get is difficult to use strategically.

Fourthly, I make a plea. If the Scottish Government or the Parliament wants the colleges to realise the potential that they have to promote Scotland abroad, not just to make money for the sector, you need to work with us, especially the civil servants in the relevant directorate. The ones who work for the universities work very closely with them, but we do not enjoy the same relationship.

George Hotchkiss: I absolutely reinforce the importance of an international dynamic within the curriculum for Scottish students. We have been developing that over a couple of years now. By the next academic year, there will be an international facet and an opportunity within almost every programme across the college. A significant number of students will have the opportunity to travel, study and work abroad. That ranges from our motor vehicle students spending time working in Sweden to a project that we are building in Morocco, working with very disadvantaged street children—I think that is the most appropriate term.

Although such projects have had a very positive impact on our students in West Lothian—in some cases within the life skills development of young

people who had been alienated from education—it is difficult to sustain or mainstream that under the current funding arrangements. Almost everything that we are doing is being supported by short-term funding applications, Erasmus being our largest funder. In an ideal world, we would be building that excellence into the curriculum on a much more sustainable and mainstreamed basis but, at the moment, it is very difficult to plan beyond an 18-month or two-year cycle. Curriculums need to be founded on principles that are more sustainable than that.

I echo what Dugald Craig said about the voice of the colleges of Scotland being heard, as well as Margaret Munckton's comments about the sustainability of funding arrangements. That situation is inhibiting the development of an excellent curriculum.

Emma Meredith: By now the committee will have a clear impression from the comments that have been made that international work is taking place across the college sector. We have gone through a period of real change, with regionalisation, changes to the ONS classification and immigration challenges. However, the work is very much continuing.

I wanted to pick up on the point about partnership working, particularly with the higher education sector. That is definitely taking place, and now that we have regionalised and merged and there are fewer colleges in Scotland, it is more straightforward for some of the universities to engage with the colleges. They absolutely want to do that, and the partnership working is taking place.

09:45

I can offer two examples of Edinburgh College partnerships, one with Heriot-Watt University, with which we are working together in Panama to deliver teacher training, and the other with Edinburgh Napier University, where we are welcoming Saudi-sponsored students to train up in English and then progress to engineering courses. Those two opportunities would not have been possible either for the college or for the universities if we had not worked together in partnership.

There is huge potential for an education sector in Scotland that brings the colleges, the universities and, where applicable, the schools together to present a united front and to say, "This is Scotland. We are open for business internationally in education." To that end, there are other kinds of fora taking place. For example, we have the international directors forum, which brings together heads of international functions at colleges and universities and involves the British Council and SDI. It is just an informal meeting, but it has been very productive in bringing together different participants from the education sector and those who have an interest in exporting the education sector internationally.

Shona Pettigrew: I support the comments by Dugald Craig of WOSCOP about the lack of a clear and focused approach at a strategic level. The Northern Irish model of collaborative working shows that those working there understand the smart exploitation of funding and of European activities and programmes that can reap sustainable benefits and can naturally lead on to commercial opportunities for students. Some of the evidence submitted appears to show that here the starting point for internationalisation is international student recruitment and commercial activities, with a sporadic focus on chasing grant money. The approach needs to be far more strategically aligned to benefit the sector by working collaboratively.

Roderick Campbell: Dugald Craig mentioned the false distinction between EU and international students, and I want to link that to the question of the post-study work visa. The figures that Colleges Scotland provided show a 75 per cent reduction in the number of college students from the EU in the period 2009-10 to 2013-14, whereas the number of international students was down by only 23 per cent. Perhaps the panel could expand on the distinction between EU students and international students. Do other witnesses agree with Dugald Craig that it is a false distinction?

I am not sure whether anyone will be able to answer my second question. As part of the framework, colleges are requested to provide a copy of their international development strategy to Colleges Scotland. I do not know whether the colleges that are represented here have all done so or whether, to the panel's knowledge, other colleges have followed suit.

Margaret Munckton: Thank you for that observation about the data that was provided. I believe that the EU number will be undercounted, as EU students are classified as home students in our records system because that is how they are treated. They are treated exactly the same as home students for feeing and for curriculum purposes, so that is probably a glitch in the data gathering rather than a true picture.

We have seen an incredible number of students from the EU. The market that is totally underrepresented in our student body is that of students from the rest of the UK, because we currently discriminate against those students. We charge commercial fees for English, Welsh and Northern Irish students, but someone who comes from France will be treated as a home student. That is just a quirk of our funding arrangements. I

do not think that we have suffered a 75 per cent reduction in the number of EU students, and I am sure that Colleges Scotland would provide better data given that insight.

I will cover a few further points. First, we are struggling to retain all the international activity that we have generated and to look for new markets. We are currently deeply involved in partnership arrangements with four Chinese universities, mainly in engineering—that was where the dual degree came from. It is not a university degree but we have been paying money to develop it. We have been developing it from Perth College as part of our strange arrangement in the Highlands and Islands, so it does involve the college sector. I was not aware that we could get Erasmus+ funding for that, but I will certainly ask how to do that, as the development is costing us dearly.

We currently have 56 Chinese students, who have just undertaken their final exams for year 3 of our degree in mechanical and electrical engineering. We have been teaching them in-country and we know that their English language needs to be much improved, although they study English from primary school in China. They obviously study the written language—that is their teaching style—because their conversational English is absolutely hopeless, never mind their technical conversational English.

We have learned lessons from this year and we have a pipeline at four universities. We have 100 students recruited in one university who will go on to their year 3 in 2015-16. Only a minor proportion of those will come to us for their year 4 honours year. We are restricting the number; the universities want to send us more, but we are concerned about our capacity to service that demand. We do not want to be overwhelmed and have to take good resources away from our home students in order to satisfy the international students—we cannot do everything. We want to do everything, but we cannot.

Out of the 56 students who, as graduands of a Scottish degree, will have a UHI graduation ceremony in deepest China in September, only about 10 will come to us for their year 4 honours year. We can increase that number, as it is a limit that we have imposed. China is not in the same situation as our Indian market, because the Chinese are a wealthy nation and parents invest heavily in their one child. The post-study visa would certainly help, but the situation in that respect does not damage the Chinese market as much, hence our strategy to change focus from India to China.

On the UKVI restriction, 46 Libyan engineers have been specifically selected by the Tripoli Government for our two-year training to make them licensed engineers under the CAA. I do not know what is more vocational than that. First, however, we need to get them through the visa process, which will be difficult. They will have to go to Tunisia for that, so we will have to get them out of Libya and into Tunisia. They will be screened in Tunisia, which means that we are at risk of negatively impacting on our highly trusted status. If those 46 engineers are refused visas, we will lose our highly trusted status, which is a big business risk for a business that is focused wholly on the international market.

We are therefore putting a pathfinder group of three engineers through the process, because if three fail, we will still retain our highly trusted status. The Libyan Government does not understand why we are only putting three engineers through; it thinks that there is a sub-plot and that we only really want three, not 46. We are trying to reassure it that it is a visa process and that everything will be fine, and it is going along with that. We are currently testing the water with three, and because they have the support of both Governments and have not just been picked off the street—they have been specifically screened—we hope that they will get through visa control. If those three get through and end up in Perth or living in Dundee, there will be celebrations because it will mean that the remaining 43 will proceed.

Forty pilots are also waiting in the wings—not the flying wings—to go through that same process. Any help that the committee could give to address the specific difficulty that we are experiencing, and also to address the impact on our UKVI highly trusted status and how we can protect that in a businesslike manner and not an immigration-policed manner, would be helpful.

Emma Meredith: I have a quick answer to the question about strategies. A number of international strategies were presented as evidence to the committee, which I hope answers the question. Some colleges have developed international strategies that will have been endorsed by our boards of management and senior management team, and those strategies will feed off the main college strategy, which encompasses all areas of college operations.

Roderick Campbell: Yes, I was getting at how universal the strategies are. I accept that the colleges represented here have done that, but I wonder whether such strategies are standard across the board.

Emma Meredith: It will depend on where the individual college is in its regionalisation process. For some colleges, that process will be much more recent. If their process is the same as the one at our college, they will lead with their main college strategy first and then develop the underpinning strategies for the curriculum, the

estates and international activity. That may be why there are not international strategies for every college that has regionalised in Scotland. Equally, some colleges may not engage in international activity for some of the reasons that we have discussed, whereas others will be pressing forward with international work.

Willie Coffey: Listening to colleagues around the table, I am getting a couple of clear messages. The first is the willingness of the college sector in Scotland to engage internationally and attract students to Scotland. The second is about the barriers that many of you have described, which appear to be more political than strategic—I think it is obvious where the problems lie. Therein lies an opportunity, given that there is a new Government in the UK, and we should make the most of that. Perhaps this is the time to strike.

You will know the Scottish Government's position on the post-study work visa and so on, and the reclassification issue, which has affected college finances, is clear. Has the college sector acted as one, or will it do so, in support of those aims and perhaps try to make direct representation to the UK Government? You will be fully supported in that action not only by the Scottish Government but by a host of new MPs in this country. This is a golden opportunity, as Dugald Craig said, and we must not miss out on it.

Margaret Munckton: The short answer is that, through Colleges Scotland's overarching agency, we will take those aims forward as part of the board activity. There is also the sub-committee of the corporate affairs committee within Colleges Scotland, which is where we will have a united voice. There are representatives of Colleges Scotland in the public gallery, and I am sure that they are taking a note to lobby heavily on that point.

The Convener: We look forward to hearing from them.

Are there any other questions or comments?

10:00

Hanzala Malik: I have two points to make. First, do you agree that the reduction in overseas student numbers has impacted on the number of subjects that you can offer? Secondly—this is more of a comment than a question—I agree that it makes sense to have a national strategy. Yes, colleges have their own strategies, which is fine and good, but a national strategy is needed to support you in your work.

To return to my question, there has been a lot of criticism about the lack of subjects on offer. Perhaps that is because we have lost a lot of overseas students, who would have helped us to retain the subjects.

Margaret Munckton: We have found that we do not have a brand abroad. We do not have a league table. We have an identity crisis about what the college sector is in the international arena. We have found that the best form of attack is being focused and leading with niche projects, and that is not about leading with everything that we can do.

Hanzala Malik: That may work for your college, but I am asking about the situation Scotland wide.

Margaret Munckton: That applies Scotland wide. I have heard from my Forth Valley colleague that their college is homing in on oil and gas. We are homing in on aircraft engineering. We are also selling music and creative industries abroad. Therefore, instead of our going with the whole shop window and confusing the market—it does not see the difference between the college and university sectors, which is understandable—the simpler that we can make the message, the better. It is about reducing the number of subjects that we are offering not for any negative reason but, rather, for the positive reason that that allows us to focus attention on, sell and market niche products that are attractive to an international market. That is what we are doing.

Hanzala Malik: You do not agree that the reduction in the number of subjects is a result of a lack of students.

Margaret Munckton: Do you mean the reduction in the number of subjects offered by the colleges as a whole?

Hanzala Malik: Yes.

Margaret Munckton: I do not think that there has been a reduction in the number of subjects.

Hanzala Malik: You obviously do not live in Scotland then.

Emma Meredith: I do not think that there has been a reduction in the number of subjects. The international marketplace changes. Some subjects are popular at particular points; some subjects remain constantly popular, such as English language, which we are hugely well placed to offer.

Some of the colleges that have merged perhaps have more to offer because they have become bigger and can offer more subjects. However, the number of students coming from specific countries has changed. As I mentioned, some markets have become high risk—India, Libya and so on have been cited. Because it is going to be much more difficult for students from those countries to get their visas, it will be more difficult for us to recruit them.

I see the difference as being largely about the countries that are flowing through to the colleges. It is difficult to say whether that is represented in any statistical data, but that is my impression.

Dugald Craig: I will make two quick points. I imagine that we would need to do research to see whether there has been an impact on the viability of certain courses. Although this was some time ago, when I was responsible for international education in a college that had more international students than any other college, it was clear that those international students kept some subjects viable. I would be astonished if that was not still the case, but we should do some research on that.

There is an important point that we cannot talk about today, because we do not have enough time. A lot of the stuff that we have talked about is to do with people coming here, but we must also do more to internationalise our students' experience and an area in which we are sadly lacking is languages. Languages education is almost dead in the sector, and we must revive it.

Margaret Munckton: It is dead in Scotland.

Andrew Campbell: Emma Meredith mentioned riskier markets. Based on my experience, those include the likes of Pakistan and India. Although those markets are risky for colleges and universities, the university sector is still recruiting large numbers of students from them.

I wonder whether there might be some support for looking at the causal link—as Emma Meredith suggested—between what is riskier for UK Visas and Immigration with regard to the college sector and what is perhaps less riskier at the higher education level. I challenge the committee to look at the research in that area and at how we can pinpoint whether an element is riskier in the college sector than in the higher education sector, despite the fact that they are essentially trying to pull in students from the same market.

The Convener: I see a lot of your colleagues nodding their heads.

Anne Cant: I do not see a reduction in the number of subjects. Dundee and Angus College and the universities did some research to understand why we are not getting as many international students in some areas. We found that our best recruitment was in Australia. I do not know whether the model that the research used was correct, but the information that we were fed back suggested that the recruiters were selling the extra activity that would be possible once the student had graduated and received their qualification. They were told that they would be able to stay and work for a further two years and would be given a green card. The qualifications and experience that were being offered were not necessarily any better, but the ability to add an extra two years to stay and work here, instead of being told to get out of the country, was seen as a positive.

The Convener: We are over time, but Jamie McGrigor has a quick question.

Jamie McGrigor: Colleges Scotland told the committee that the framework for the future of internationalisation in the college sector was published in 2014. The international strategy for Edinburgh College appears to be optimistic in stating that it will do certain things by 2018. Is that strategy based on the framework or is it your own? What do you think is the best strategy? We have had several different strategies, as far as I can see.

Emma Meredith: Our strategy was developed off the college's main strategic plan, before the Colleges Scotland strategy to which you refer was published. We have an active portfolio of international work, and as a merged college we wanted to have a strategy ready that we could give to stakeholders to show that we are working actively internationally.

On the question of which strategy is right, or which one we would use, every individual institution in the college sector and the university sector will have its own strategy but they will all work to overarching initiatives or strategies, whether at the Colleges Scotland level, the national level or the UK level. We will work at different levels according to the context in which we are operating.

The Convener: We could probably spend all morning discussing all those aspects, but we have a second panel of witnesses coming to give evidence to the inquiry.

I thank you all for your time and for your contributions and written submissions. If you have any more contributions, please send them to us, as we are very interested in what you have to say. We have heard your messages loud and clear today, and I strongly suspect that they will inform some of what we feed back to the Government.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:08

Meeting suspended.

10:12

On resuming—

The Convener: We continue our connecting Scotland inquiry with a number of witnesses from the third sector and civic society. I believe that they were able to listen to the previous session, in which issues were raised by the college sector.

Again, I will just go round the table and ask people to introduce themselves. I am the MSP for Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse and convener of the committee.

Hanzala Malik: I am deputy convener of the committee and an MSP for Glasgow.

Willie Coffey: I am the MSP for Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley.

Gordon Adam (Royal Society of Edinburgh): I am director of development and communications at the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Roderick Campbell: I am the MSP for North East Fife, and I am also a member of Amnesty International.

Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance): I am director of the Poverty Alliance and vice president of the European anti-poverty network.

Alison Cairns (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations): I am head of European affairs with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, and I am on the board of the European Network of National Civil Society Associations.

David Hope-Jones (Scotland Malawi Partnership): I am principal officer of the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

Jamie McGrigor: I am a Highlands and Islands MSP.

Julie Hepburn (Amnesty International): I cover advocacy and education for Amnesty International in Scotland.

Bruce Adamson (Scottish Human Rights Commission): I am a legal officer for the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

The Convener: Good morning, everyone. We managed to cover all of Scotland with the colleges, and it looks like we will cover most of the world in this session.

I welcome you all to the committee. If no one would like to raise any points at the start of the session, we will go straight to questions. Jamie McGrigor has a question ready to go, I think.

Jamie McGrigor: I have a question on human rights.

The Convener: You knock yourself out.

Jamie McGrigor: The other day, I was involved in the case of a dairy farmer who considered that his quota had been taken away. He could get a lawyer in Scotland to represent him only if he paid £25,000 in advance. Human rights are only human rights if you can access them. If you cannot access them through a lawyer, what is the point?

10:15

The Convener: Bruce, can you shed some light on the situation?

Bruce Adamson: Yes—he says confidently.

Mr McGrigor has focused on a key issue in human rights, which is access to justice. The issue of milk quotas has previously come before the Parliament at the Public Petitions Committee, and the commission has commented on it. I will comment not on the individual case but on the wider point about access to justice. The state is required to set up a legal framework to ensure that people can access justice and get a remedy for breaches of their human rights. The framework that we have developed in Scotland comes through the legal system, with legal aid available for those who cannot afford representation.

It is no surprise to anyone that the issue needs further consideration. There is also a wider point about legal education, alternative dispute resolution methods and the way in which we provide for remedies through the court system. There is significant work to be done on each of those aspects.

On legal education, the experience of Mr McGrigor's constituent, in being unable to find a lawyer who will take on their case, is not unique. The legal community needs to do more to improve legal education in Scotland. There are some good legal training programmes at the European and international levels. It is an area that the commission is keen to develop further. It links to what the witnesses in the previous session were saying, which is that we could improve our ability to access international expertise and bring it back to Scotland. There is a real gap that we need to fill.

There are real concerns about the cuts to legal aid limiting people's ability to access justice. There is also scope to look at alternative ways of resolving disputes. All those things form part of the solution.

Hanzala Malik: I have to be honest—I did not understand that. Perhaps I picked Jamie McGrigor up wrong, but I thought that his question was about an individual who wishes to pursue a legal case because he feels that his human rights have been infringed. Lawyers are not willing to take the case on unless he pays a hefty fee. If he is unable

to do that, how will he get justice, in terms of his human rights? Am I right, Jamie?

Jamie McGrigor: That was my question.

Hanzala Malik: I thought that it was, but I did not hear an answer to it. Could you be a bit clearer, Mr Adamson, so that I can understand your answer? You probably come from a legal background but I am a layperson. Will you explain how that individual can get justice?

Bruce Adamson: I apologise.

Hanzala Malik: It is not your fault; I am sure that it is mine.

Bruce Adamson: The instance that we are talking about relates to respect for property rights in relation to milk quotas. My understanding is that the individual feels that their property rights have been infringed by restrictions on them selling an interest that they have. The system that we have in Scotland is that they should be able to go to the courts to seek justice for that, and the legal profession should be able to provide support for them to do that.

Hanzala Malik: I am with you so far.

Bruce Adamson: The state is required to ensure that access to justice is provided. One of the ways in which the state has said that it does that is by providing legal aid for those who cannot afford representation. That is challenging, because legal aid is not always available

It is a problem, particularly when we talk about civil cases and the recovery of money, that lawyers are also in the profession of making money. I will not speak for individual lawyers and the decisions that they make—

Hanzala Malik: This is where it gets difficult for me.

Bruce Adamson: The lawyers who were approached obviously decided that they were unable to take the case forward—or at least that they needed up-front funding for it. One of the challenges is that there are not enough lawyers in Scotland who are trained in human rights issues. The pool of people you can ask to take on your case is smaller than it should be. We can do a lot to improve legal education and lawyers' understanding of human rights, which would allow individuals to approach more lawyers than they currently can. At the moment, very few lawyers take on that type of case. That is one of the points that I was making.

I would not want to comment on whether legal aid would be appropriate here.

Hanzala Malik: You still have not answered the question—maybe you do not know the answer. The question is: how can that individual get justice and protect his human rights? Jamie, do you agree that that is what we are trying to find out?

Jamie McGrigor: Yes. That seems to be the crux of the whole thing. It is all very well saying that you have got these rights but if you cannot access them, it is catch-22.

The Convener: Does Julie Hepburn have an angle on this that would help to inform us?

Julie Hepburn: To be honest, the domestic legal side is not our area of expertise. I would just echo what has been said, which has also been said to us by quite a lot of people. The issue is access to justice. When we speak to lawyers, they tell us that there is a great expectation that they will take on human rights cases for free, just because—for example, for the greater good or for the principle of it. A lot of lawyers who work on human rights cases end up having to do a lot of work for free. They do it because they believe in it, but the crux of the matter is that there are not enough people to take on human rights cases at a reasonable cost or with the costs covered.

The Convener: Is there a register or list of practising human rights lawyers in Scotland?

Bruce Adamson: The Law Society of Scotland keeps a list.

In order to best protect human rights, we need to have in place good law, policy and practice. By the time you need a lawyer, something has gone wrong. Given the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, there is a requirement on them to put in place laws that protect people's human rights. The legal framework needs to be in place. A lot of positive things can be done to ensure that people do not end up being forced to go to the courts to enforce their rights. There is a problem when you get to that stage, particularly with some types of case.

The Convener: Rod, while declaring an interest, can you enlighten us?

Roderick Campbell: Yes. I am a member of the Faculty of Advocates, and I am also a member of the Justice Committee.

The Parliament, the Justice Committee and others have been looking at alternative dispute resolution and ways of funding that. It is a kind of involved issue to develop for this session, but the central point is that if you cannot access your human rights, they are of lesser value.

The Convener: Can I shift us back to the agenda?

Jamie McGrigor: We have spent a lot of time on this. I am sorry for asking the question, but it is something that I felt I had to ask.

The Convener: There is a whole aspect of international engagement that involves human rights as well.

How do the witnesses take forward their international engagement? Do you work together on it? Are there specific aspects of it that you work on together and discrete aspects that you do as individual groups?

Gordon Adam: We work with other organisations. The Royal Society of Edinburgh recently became a member of connected Scotland, which is a group of eight organisations that work together to promote best practice in higher education in Scotland internationally. Those eight organisations are the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the British Council Scotland, Universities Scotland, the Scottish funding council, the Scottish Government and the three enterprise bodies—Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and SDI.

We work together to promote higher education internationally. As part of that, we have three priority countries, which are China, Brazil and Malaysia, and we are looking at things that we can do with those three countries.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, in particular, has very strong relations with China. We have memoranda of understanding with the four main learned societies: the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences—I am giving you a lot of names—the Chinese Academy of Engineering and the National Natural Science Foundation of China. In fact, the president of the Chinese Academy of Science is coming tomorrow. He will be admitted as an honorary fellow of the RSE, and he will also meet the First Minister in Glasgow.

Therefore, we work in our own area with the countries with which we have memoranda of understanding and we work in partnership with other organisations. The simple answer is that we do both.

Peter Kelly: Probably like most of the organisations here, we connect when we need to. Obviously, our main focus is poverty, and our main international focus is European policy. We work, through the European anti-poverty network, at the UK level and with our colleagues right across Europe.

In Scotland, we have worked with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations on some European issues—for example, on the development of the next European social fund programme. We are starting to do more work with NIDOS—the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland. We make connections where we can.

The point that we made in our written evidence is that European policy issues can sometimes seem very remote. It is a challenge to work on those issues not only with other organisations but with our own members, who want us to work on the issues that seem most directly relevant. I am being quite honest: we sometimes have a job convincing organisations that European policy is important. We believe that it is, and we can demonstrate that it is over and over again. As we discuss the upcoming referendum over the next two years, many organisations will come to discover that European policy is quite important.

The Convener: We had an event last week in Lanarkshire that involved NIDOS. I was very pleased to launch the Scotland versus poverty programme, which you have been involved in. We have some excellent information on that.

Alison Cairns: Thanks very much for having us today. It is great to be talking about this subject. We would probably all like to talk about it more, and I hope that we will.

It is fair to say that in the past, a lot of SCVO's European work has been filtered through domestic arrangements and focused on European structural funds and the opportunities around them. We have always had connections to our international organisation, Civicus, which is an international alliance of civil society organisations. However, it has been difficult to engage and work at that level.

We have a much greater focus on Europe and, going forward, we will have even more of a focus on Europe. We are involved in ENNA—the European Network of National Civil Society Associations—which is a network of national umbrella SCVO-like bodies in all the EU countries. We have about 23 members in 21 countries: one member is a big umbrella organisation that covers quite a few countries in the Balkans.

ENNA has an office in Brussels and a couple of staff. It has struggled with capacity. It is a membership-based network and we have accessed bits of money from the Commission to strengthen it so that it can benefit not just its member organisations but their members. We have gone through ups and downs with that.

However, the primary goal of ENNA for all my colleagues across Europe has been to do more of what Peter Kelly talked about—to strengthen our ability to engage and influence policy at a European level and to have greater connections to the Parliament, the Commission, funding opportunities and all sorts of other things. Civil society would like to have the capacity and ability that commercial organisations and so on have to do business in Europe.

10:30

Equally, a big part of our work with our colleagues across Europe is around participation. We all have similar values in our approach to democracies in Europe, and participation in democracy is a very strong element of our work. We are trying to strengthen one another's networks and to begin to influence things at the policy level, but there is also a changing discourse in the European Union around growth being inclusive and around social policies needing to grow at the same rate as economic policies. Therefore, a bit of attention and focus is shifting to civil society with regard to solutions. We have a window of opportunity for collaborating on that.

At the SCVO, we are very conscious that there are lots of transnational opportunities—not just to collaborate, share and learn but in relation to funding—that Scottish organisations are missing out on because we do not have the focus, the attention and the capacity to grasp them. We are not on the front foot when it comes to that.

The SCVO recently produced its new three-year strategic plan, and we are bringing Europe right up to the top of the agenda so that we can open up and find transnational opportunities for all our members in the sector. We want the organisations that we work with across Europe to partner with Scottish organisations because we all know the benefits that such partnerships bring. We also want to try to mobilise people around some of the things that bind us together—the things that we want to change in Europe. Obviously, as with organisations such as Peter Kelly's and Julie Hepburn's, some very key issues will come into focus, or are already very much in focus, but we are not geared up enough to challenge them.

The Convener: We had a lovely visit from some of your European partners last week.

Alison Cairns: We did.

The Convener: David, will you give us a wee insight into what your organisation does? For the record, I have been involved with the Scotland Malawi Partnership, too.

David Hope-Jones: The Scotland Malawi Partnership is the national umbrella agency that exists to co-ordinate, represent and support the civic links between Scotland and Malawi. More than 94,000 Scots have an active link with Malawi each year; 46 per cent of Scots have a friend or family member with some sort of connection to Malawi; and more than 300,000 Scots benefit from those connections with Malawi. We are a large and diverse network that is composed of every university in Scotland, half the local authorities, 153 schools—both primary and secondary—and hundreds of churches, charities, community groups and diaspora groups, all of which are engaged in a civic effort that goes back 156 years to the travels of Dr David Livingstone.

Collaboration and connections are absolutely crucial and Scotland does them quite well. It is often said that there are fewer egos and logos in Scotland, and I absolutely agree. It is easier to build those sorts of collaborations. We saw it with the make poverty history campaign some time ago and more recently with the enough food for everyone if campaign. Our network links in very well with NIDOS, which I work closely with day to day. I also work with the Scottish Fair Trade Forum on ideas in relation to development, education and global citizenship in schools and with the SCVO.

The key point that I want to make in relation to Scotland's international work is about the need to value the role of civic society. It is fantastic that we have these networks and strong organisations, but the most special thing about what Scotland does internationally is what the people of Scotland do with their own time and energy. We exist as a network to harness that experience, enthusiasm and expertise.

On the first question that was asked, I can recount a couple of fantastic links between Scotland and Malawi. One involves the Faculty of Advocates and another involves the SRUC—Scotland's Rural College—helping to increase productivity in dairy farming in Malawi. Really, there are some sort of connections between the two countries involving almost all aspects of civic society.

People-to-people endeavours are really important. As you look to capture what Scotland does internationally, it is important that you do not forget that it is the people of Scotland giving up their time that makes us stand out. For the past seven years, I have been saying that I do not know of any comparable north-south civic relationship, and no one has ever corrected me. Almost every month that I do this job, I am contacted by ambassadors and honorary consuls who ask me how Scotland developed its relationship with Malawi. I think that it is the envy of many countries and it is being emulated across the world. We should retain our focus on it as a dignified two-way partnership and be rightly proud of it.

The Convener: Perhaps providence ensured that we are conducting today's meeting in the David Livingstone room in Parliament.

I think you are absolutely right. A few years ago, I visited Malawi with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to work with women's groups and people who were standing for election. In every primary school, children could tell me things about David Livingstone and Scotland, and their

education system and other things were familiar. The people are very warm and the influence that our country and theirs have had on each other is tremendous. I will always support the work that you do to continue that.

Julie, will you give us an overview of some of the things that Amnesty International is involved in internationally and say how it connects with the focus that political and civic Scotland has?

Julie Hepburn: The clue is in the name. Amnesty International is a massive organisation that is involved in more than 70 countries at a national level. It is quite a challenge for Amnesty Scotland just to connect with the constituent parts of our own organisation.

Amnesty Scotland is part of Amnesty UK, so we are quite a small outpost. We spend a lot of time working within our own organisation, frankly, but we also work with a number of other organisations such as Oxfam, with which we worked closely on the arms trade treaty campaign. We work with other organisations, such as the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, to lobby on issues such as improvements to business practices and human rights. We work with organisations across civic Scotland that are involved in Scotland's national action plan for human rights—SNAP—which is connected internationally through the Scottish Human Rights Commission. We also work closely with the Scottish Government on the international agenda through things such as the international human rights advisory panel and SNAP. We co-convene one of the SNAP action groups with the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the Scottish Government.

A lot of our focus is on using our influence and expertise to advise the Scottish Government on international matters. We spend a lot of time connecting with people in Amnesty International to bring that expertise to Scotland. For example, in advance of the Commonwealth games, we were asked what our main issues would be in relation to the visiting Commonwealth officials and politicians. We spent a lot of time speaking to colleagues around the world who have contacts on the ground to find out what their main human rights concerns were, and we put all of that together in a monster briefing for the Scottish Government officials to help to inform the bilateral discussions that were being held in connection with the games. We spend a lot of time gathering evidence and channelling it through to Scottish organisations, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, and we brief MSPs on various issues.

I see our work as harnessing Amnesty's expertise and bringing it to Scotland, and trying to highlight our campaigns and engage people in Scotland in that process.

The Convener: I am involved in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. Last year, it was extremely interested in SNAP, with Scotland being seen as almost a beacon of the way in which good human rights policy that works on the ground can be taken forward. That was very well respected and received in Europe, and I think that people are still looking to you for more inspiration. We know what is happening in Europe, but can you give us some insight into what is happening in the wider world?

Bruce Adamson: Absolutely. It is a great pleasure to hear not only your comments, convener, but the comments that colleagues have made. Indeed, it brings to mind a proverb from my home country New Zealand, "He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!", which means, "What's the most important thing in the world? It's people! It's people! It's people!" What has come through strongly from what all colleagues have been saying is that Scotland does incredibly well on the international stage because of its people and their ability to make these connections and share best practice.

As I am sure you know, the Scottish Human Rights Commission was set up by this Parliament in 2006, but the concept of national human rights institutions goes back to the earliest days of the United Nations in 1946 when, after the atrocities of the second world war and the building of the international human rights network, the UN's economic and social council said, "We need another type of body." By that, it meant local and not state institutions that were able to work on the ground and apply international standards domestically while providing a bridge to the international framework and giving us information at an international level.

That is very much where the Scottish Human Rights Commission sits, along with 106 similar institutions across the world, 40 of which are in Europe, and we work together in a number of ways to improve international standards globally and to play a bridging role in bringing those standards back. As Julie Hepburn and you, convener, have pointed out, the national action plan on human rights is one area in which Scotland is leading the way. It has been recognised by not only the UN but the Council of Europe, where the model has been promoted to the council by the commissioner for human rights and has been tried particularly in countries such as Ukraine that are going through very difficult circumstances. Our colleagues there are looking very closely at the Scottish model.

What is different about the Scottish model for a national action plan is the way in which it was developed, and that links back to what Julie Hepburn has been saying. The concept of such a

plan has been around for a long time, and it was discussed extensively at the world conference on human rights in Vienna in 1993, at which all countries of the world agreed to set out a comprehensive action plan for delivering on their human rights obligations. In most countries, that has been a Government programme; in other words, the Government has set out a list and said, "This is what we're doing, based on the recommendations that have been made through the monitoring process."

In Scotland, we did things a wee bit differently by getting civil society and Government around the table, trying to reach out to the most marginalised people in Scotland and those who were really struggling to be heard and creating a really consultative process in order to come up with a negotiated plan that could then be monitored collectively. That different approach is what the world is very interested in. Time does not allow me to go into all of that, but it is very much about ensuring that people's lives are improved in really practical ways, that our culture moves in a progressive way, that we develop a human rights culture and that we meet our international obligations in reporting to the monitoring bodies and ensuring that we apply things, bring back best practice and live up to our obligation to lead the way.

Julie Hepburn highlighted the Commonwealth games, and I point out that, for the games in Scotland, a human rights plan was attached for the first time to their design, the way that they were run and their outcome. Other important issues include climate justice, on which Scotland is really leading the way; business and human rights; and the rights of older people, and Scotland is very much part of the international development of best practice in all those matters.

I could go on and on, but I am aware of the time, so I will stop there.

The Convener: Willie Coffey has a question.

Willie Coffey: I am hearing quite a bewildering array of good and positive messages from around the table, convener. It makes quite a contrast with the witnesses in the previous session, who had a similar focus on international engagement. There is such a variety of issues that I find it difficult to know which one to pick up on. For a start, I was really impressed with the comments from Gordon Adam of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and my attention was also drawn to Peter Kelly's comments.

Ali, you talked about engagement with the European Union and civic society and how you influence European policy. Will you say a wee bit more about that? Can you see your influence on EU policy development actually happening? We have raised this question at the committee on a number of occasions. How best do we try to influence the European policy agenda through our elected members or through the Commission? How do you guys try to achieve that?

10:45

Alison Cairns: It is not easy—it is a challenge. The structure involves the European Economic and Social Committee, which is one of the two committees, as well as the European Commission. There is a group in the EESC that is dedicated to civil society, and every member state has a civil society representative on that committee. We have one in Scotland, and the representative is just about to change—a previous colleague of yours, Irene Oldfather, is about to become the Scottish representative on the EESC for us.

However, the structure that is in place—the EESC—is perhaps not empowered enough to hold the Commission to account or to work on reform. Furthermore, there is a deficit between that representation role and the sector in Scotland. We are going to try and be on the front foot and address that a bit better, empowering Irene Oldfather and our colleagues across Europe to try and reform the EESC so that it is more accountable to the sector and we have a more mutual process.

The EESC is a body that we can work through, but it has not been the best route for us. In civil society, we tend to like to do things ourselves. As I mentioned earlier, we have our European network of councils for voluntary organisations, or CVOs. That has been a bit of a slow burner, because of issues with trying to resource it.

We are beginning to work out how to influence people within the Commission, but we have some way to go before we have the capacity to work with the European Parliament better and to understand how things work there. There are some big, strong movements in Europe that are doing quite well on particular issues and which are quite well organised. Peter Kelly is involved in one of them, so I will let him chat about that.

How effective has that influence been? To date, it has probably been reasonably minimal. That is one of the things that we discussed last week. We held a conference here in Edinburgh with the EESC on the Milan declaration on EU policies, which focuses on how civil society can engage in and influence change within the European Union. That influence has been minimal because of the pressure on European democracies around their welfare states and the need to look for solutions elsewhere.

A whole array of things are happening throughout Europe on the changes that are

happening to welfare. The EESC is looking at solutions coming from civil society, but there is quite a gap between that intention and how we get there. In Italy, for example, large parts of heath, such as maternity services, are delivered by civil society. The issue is how those solutions—all the social innovation that is being talked about—get the same attention and focus as technology and commercial research and development innovation.

I have probably taken a long way round to say that we are not being particularly influential on European policy, but we are trying to get on the front foot and to collaborate with our colleagues across Europe so as to be better at that.

Peter Kelly: It is a big question to ask how influential we have been. The only way that organisations and networks such the Poverty Alliance can be influential is through working with others. As Ali Cairns has said, we work with 31 networks across Europe now, and that goes beyond the boundaries of the EU. It is only by working with those other networks through our organisation that is based in Brussels—it is absolutely crucial; there is no doubt about that—that we can have influence. In the past, the EAPN has been extremely influential. Whole elements of the Lisbon strategy were the result of lobbying by the EAPN in particular, but the wider social platform in Brussels has also made a real difference.

Many civil society organisations try to exert influence over policy development, but that influence sometimes wanes. In the past few years, as we have moved to the Europe 2020 strategy, we have had less of an influence over how the strategies have developed, but the important thing for us is still to be there and still to be discussing, particularly with the new Presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament. The EAPN has been fortunate to have had meetings with the Cabinets of both of them, and I have been involved. In that way, we can have a direct influence on how some of the discussions are going.

However, we must recognise that that is part of a wider change in Europe. There is a degree of disenchantment with and disengagement from European politics in many countries, and as a network of civil society organisations, we think that we have a responsibility to try to promote re-engagement. We will work with the Commission, political parties and anyone, really, to provide ways to allow people to engage with European policy and to allow us to have an influence over policy.

Hanzala Malik: Like Willie Coffey, I am pleased about the work that you are doing, but I want to go back to our first question. We have people who might be slipping through the net in Scotland. I would be interested to hear about what options you could offer such people. I am sure that working with people in China is just as important, but I want our own Scots to get justice, as well, and their human rights not to be infringed. Can you give us any advice or direction so that we can also pursue that angle?

Julie Hepburn: This afternoon, I will hotfoot it through to Glasgow for a meeting of the SNAP co-conveners. A number of action groups have been set up as a result of SNAP—I think that there are five. We are on the one to do with international obligations and I think that another focuses on justice and access to justice. It would be well worth giving that feedback to that SNAP action group for it to take forward.

A lot of domestic work on human rights now happens through the prism of SNAP, to use my catchphrase. From my observation, that is the way to make progress. You could contact the SNAP action group and check that that issue is on its radar. I do not know whether Bruce Adamson knows whether the issue is on the agenda. The lack of access to justice is certainly quite a high-profile issue that we have encountered in the domestic human rights agenda.

Hanzala Malik: That is very helpful. Thank you. Can you send me information on that?

Julie Hepburn: Yes.

Hanzala Malik: That would be fantastic. Thank you very much.

The Convener: Does David Hope-Jones want to come back in on the back of Willie Coffey's question?

David Hope-Jones: Yes—just briefly.

As a network, we are active in the Scottish Parliament obviously and in Westminster, and our colleagues in Malawi are active in the Malawi Parliament, but we have a few touch points with Brussels, as well. I will give one brief example.

Two or three months ago, Charles Chavi, who is a smallholder sugar cane farmer, came across to visit Scotland. He was at a Scottish Fair Trade Forum event. One issue that he raised came from the EU. The communities that he worked with and represented had received a lot of support from the EU to develop their capacity to grow sugar cane. A change in the rules in 2017, which I will spare members the details of, means that it will be very hard—indeed, almost impossible—for those communities to export to the EU at all. The UK is one of their major markets.

As a civic network, we were able to write straight away to Scotland's six MEPs. Four of them got back to me within a week. I will not name those who did not, but four of them got back to us

and said, “Yes, this is something that we would like to represent.” Within a month, four letters had been written to significant individuals in Brussels and the question had been asked in the European Parliament. I am not going to kid on that we have been able to effect serious and substantial change but, by having an effective network, we were able to listen seriously to issues on the ground and to communicate them effectively through to Brussels.

I have remained in contact with Charles Chavi in Mzuzu in the northern region of Malawi, and he was gobsmacked that he could come to a meeting of civil society individuals who, because of their strong networks, could communicate issues to elected representatives, and that those representatives felt a genuine pressure to report back on what they had done, so that the issues were taken forward. Ours is a small voice in Brussels, but it was inspiring to see that we were able to use those networks to listen to the issues on the ground and to communicate them effectively, even in the European Parliament.

Peter Kelly: I would like to follow up on that and comment on Hanzala Malik’s question as well. It is important to emphasise that any lobbying work that civil society organisations do at the European level or beyond is done for no other reason than to improve the position of the people for whom we are working in Scotland and in the UK. However, as Ali Cairns said, there is a question of wider solidarity with people who are living on low incomes across Europe. There is a shared destiny for many people across Europe, and bringing real voices to policy makers is something that allows us to exert influence over European policy. Committee members know that, because you sent us a message of support last year when we took a delegation of people with direct experience of poverty to a major European meeting.

It is important to recognise that our efforts at the European level or elsewhere internationally are about bringing change to Scotland. It can seem slow, and sometimes it is far too slow, but that is the key aim of the work that we do at that level.

Gordon Adam: I wanted to comment on our work in a European context. As I mentioned, China is important for us, but Europe is important too. The main basis of our work is the exchange of researchers and research through the 21 memoranda of understanding that we have with sister academies around the world. Eleven of them are in Europe, so Europe remains an important place for our work. We are also members of ALLEA, the all European academies network, and at present one of our fellows, Graham Caie, sits on the board of ALLEA, so we have influence among other academies throughout Europe, which is important from our point of view. We hope that it means that the quality of Scottish research and what we are doing is seen not just around the world but by our partners in Europe.

Bruce Adamson: I echo what others have said. When Julie Hepburn started, she said that the clue was in the title when it comes to Amnesty International. The clue is in the title for us as well. It is the Scottish Human Rights Commission and we are a national human rights institution. As others have said, all our international work on improving the human rights framework is with a view to bringing it back home into the small places. The Scottish national action plan on human rights is very much about that, with negotiated actions and outcomes around such things as poverty, the effect of austerity and the growing challenges for our ageing population. All those things are contained within our work and there is real action related to them.

Access to justice is a real challenge. Some of our sister organisations in other countries have a quasi-judicial function. Their Parliaments have decided to allow them to hear cases. They are generally big and well funded, because they need to be to take on individual cases. We have said that the court system does that, and work is being done by the Justice Committee and by others to ensure that the court system functions effectively in providing access to justice.

A huge amount is also being done to look at alternatives. A lot of work is being done on victims of historical abuse, and the Apologies (Scotland) Bill is before Parliament at the moment. There are inquiries and a whole bunch of alternative ways of doing things, rather than just using the court system. A lot is going on.

11:00

Internationally, we work with our colleagues in the European network and we work directly with the UN, where we have speaking rights in a number of fora and use them to focus international attention on what is happening in Scotland, good and bad, to bring pressure to bear on the Government here. At European level, we do the same at the Council of Europe and the European Union.

When we have played an active role in the Council of Europe, a lot of our focus has been on the reform of the European Court of Human Rights, which has been in need of reform and subject to significant attack that has the potential to undermine the rights of individuals to seek justice at that court. One of our great successes from spending a lot of energy on that during the past few years is the fact that it has not got worse. I am not saying that the court’s systems have improved, but there was a risk that limitations would have been put on people being able to

access that court, and that has not happened because a lot of work has been done. Sometimes a success is just about preventing regression. That is quite important.

One of the interesting developments that I hope we have time to talk about—perhaps another time—is the growing recognition that national Parliaments have an important role to play as part of the human rights framework. We have seen that through the focus of resolutions at the UN, the Council of Europe and the EU, and the reform of the European Court is now very much focused on it. The most recent high-level conference to be held in Brussels focused on what Parliaments should be doing to ensure that human rights are respected through their roles as legislators and in serving constituents. A lot is being done on the role of Parliaments and it is becoming a new focus for Europe. There is a growing understanding of the role of Parliaments and parliamentarians at the national and regional level; of members who serve in a dual capacity, as in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which has national politicians sitting in a regional Parliament; and of directly elected members at the European Parliament. There is a lot of focus on that area at the moment, and a lot of opportunity to develop new roles and new understanding for members.

The Convener: The Council of Europe was particularly interested in how Scotland is taking one direction on human rights while the rest of the UK is taking another. No doubt many gave the same sigh of relief as I did yesterday when there was no announcement of a repeal bill, but there will be a consultation and I am sure that you will take part in that at the UK Government level.

Bruce Adamson: We certainly will, as will others. Our position has always been that the test is what will improve the protection and promotion of human rights. We want to see no retrogression and to think about how we can go further to put in place things that will improve human rights. Any such change needs to be done in a fully participative way, so we welcome any commitment to consultation and we, along with our partners, will be strongly urging that the consultation should be fully participative, should involve everyone and should improve education.

Julie Hepburn: Convener, I echo what you said about the stark contrast between the approach of the Scottish Government and that of the UK Government. The human rights situation and the realisation of rights in Scotland are not perfect, which is why we need SNAP. The big difference is that we are pushing at an open door. There is a willingness to make progress on human rights.

What is happening with the Human Rights Act 1998 at UK level brings the contrast into strong focus. Up here there is political consensus and consensus among civil society along with strong support for the Human Rights Act 1998 among the general population, but that is not the case elsewhere. We work across the UK and I have colleagues in London who are envious of the human rights environment that we have up here. Scotland has a lot of potential to work together and we recommend having an international human rights strategy to pull together the good work that is being done by the Government and the Parliament and across organisations in Scotland. We need to take that team Scotland approach to progressing human rights and pull it together so that it can be more of a beacon on the international stage. We need to try to bypass some of the UK Government's attacks on human rights.

Adam Ingram: This whole inquiry is about the efficacy and effectiveness of Scotland's international engagement, and the committee is looking to make recommendations about how that can be improved. Going round the table, could you tell me one thing that you think needs to be improved, and say how we could do it? For example, I noticed that the SCVO was suggesting that there should be some sort of agency that would pull things together for the third sector—that might be one idea for you to tell us about. Could you each suggest one area, measure or priority for improvement?

Alison Cairns: On the agency point, in our evidence we suggested that quite a lot of investment, attention and focus, including from the Scottish Government, goes into helping private and commercial enterprise to make new markets and collaborations. For example, there is SDI and Scotland Europa. However, the same focus and attention is not given to civil society making its way in Europe or internationally. We also do business together, and we collaborate not just on changing policy but on big societal changes that have a direct impact on everybody. We suggested that there needs to be more glue around all the disparate bits that take place within Scotland's civil society. Lots of individuals and organisations are reaching out and doing good stuff, and certainly at the SCVO we have not had the ability to focus and harness all that. We have been on the back foot reacting to things, and our management board has now committed to trying to find a way to get us on the front foot. I suppose that we would like a listening ear on how to help us all get on the front foot with some of these things.

One key thing for us at the SCVO, as well as influencing policy and trying to open up opportunities for the sector—including transnational projects and all sorts of things—is strengthening participative democracy. There are two big ideas in democracy, which are representation and participation, and you guys are

all part of the representation side of democracy in the traditional sense. For us, participative democracy will bring about real, fundamental change throughout our societies. Civil society organisations have a different kind of representation. For example, they represent the interests of Peter Kelly's organisation. Who represents better or more continually the interests of people who are suffering poverty—elected representatives or Peter's organisation? He does that work day in, day out. His organisation and others like it will involve their users, volunteers and members in their work. People are participating in their democracies. A big part of what we want to achieve is to strengthen such participation, which will bring about the bigger changes required throughout Europe.

The Convener: Would you suggest something similar to NIDOS, the international development umbrella? Is that what you are thinking?

Alison Cairns: We are trying to look at how we can prioritise investment at the SCVO and begin to provide some of that glue. A range of organisations are doing European work, and we have relations with MEPs and the European Economic and Social Committee. We have our big ENNA network of CVOs with some staff in Brussels. We get very intermittent capacity—we get a little money to do some work, and then it fades away.

That is very hard. It is also hard just getting information about the opportunities that are out there. For example, horizon 2020 is bringing a huge amount of opportunities, but Scotland is not benefiting enough from it, because we do not have the same support. We do not have Scotland Europa or SDI chuntering out all the information about that to our sector.

Our sector would love to be involved much more on transnational work, but its ability to grasp the opportunities quickly is difficult. Therefore, we are looking at how we can make it easier for people to take up transnational opportunities. Indeed, loads of people get in touch with us saying, "Can you get a Scottish partner for this? Can you get a Scottish partner for that?" We are not organised enough to do that.

As I say, it is all about us trying to get on to the front foot. We are looking at how we can staff up internally in order to provide that glue a bit better for the sector. We are finding our own solution, but we would be very happy for you to help us with that solution.

The Convener: Do those views reflect those of the other witnesses?

David Hope-Jones: To answer the original question, we should not lose sight of what Scotland does well, which I re-emphasise is the engagement of civic society. The committee started by looking at the Scottish Government's international framework, which has good points. While the inquiry has been going on, the updated version has been released. In it, the fundamental basis and justification—the driver—for Scotland's internationalism seem to be domestic economic gain. We are selling Scotland short if that is the case. If that is all that we believe internationalism is about, that flies in the face of a proud 200-year history of Scotland engaging internationally for reasons of global citizenship, social justice, solidarity, support and mutual benefit and understanding.

I understand that economic drivers are important but, if that is the justification, that is a weakness and we will lose sight of what our country is doing that is different from what every other country in the world is doing. If we lose that, we will have just another international strategy much like every other one in the world.

We should celebrate and put at the strategy's centre how people add value and what role volunteerism and social justice have in it. That is essential for the Parliament and for the Government.

The Convener: You have just given us a string of questions to put to the minister.

Peter Kelly: In answer to Adam Ingram's question, it is quite surprising that we have not come here with a long list of demands of the Government. Ali Cairns put it quite well. The sector and many civil society and voluntary organisations recognise that we must do better. There are opportunities, and we must think about how we organise ourselves. I know that the SCVO is doing that; the Poverty Alliance and the EAPN across the UK are doing that, too.

We could be helped with that through forums such as this one. This discussion is quite unusual; we do not often have such discussions. It will be important to maintain a relationship with the committee.

David Hope-Jones's point is well made. We need a strategy that says what we are doing differently in Scotland—there are many such things—and we need to be able to talk to our colleagues across Europe about what we are doing differently.

As the agenda develops in Scotland—we look forward to the development of a new social justice action plan, which will have a horizon up to 2030, I think—we must learn much from other European countries on employability and the reform of our welfare system. There is much that we should also try to avoid.

If a demand was to be made, it would be that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament should look outwards and learn those lessons. If they work with civil society organisations that have such connections, we can help with the learning process.

11:15

Gordon Adam: To echo what David Hope-Jones said, we should be positive about ourselves as a country and what we have to give. We have the 21 memoranda of understanding, but there are many countries that would like to sign memoranda with us, which is partly because the research in Scotland is of such high quality. We in Scotland punch above our weight in the UK on the amount of money that we get through our universities, because of the quality of research. There is an opportunity to work even more with countries and exchange researchers and research at a high level. That is important and we can do more; if we had more resource, we could do that.

I mentioned the connected Scotland initiative, and I think that working in partnership with organisations that might not be directly linked to what we are doing but which offer opportunities to work together on slightly different projects can be beneficial as well. I mentioned the Chinese; we went to China at the beginning of December last year to do workshops with not only academics but industrialists and businesspeople. We did that through the innovation centres—we took three of them with us. We got that opportunity through the SFC, and we also worked with SDI in China to involve other industrialists and people. The RSE might not have done that if it had not been part of connected Scotland, and it is building further links.

Developing partnerships provides a great opportunity for Scotland and us all to link together a bit more. One thing that I might take from today's discussion is that people around this table are thinking that perhaps they can link a wee bit more with some of the organisations that they have spoken to.

The Convener: We could make this all about connecting Scotland with other people, which we would be delighted to facilitate.

Jamie McGrigor: David Hope-Jones made the point that Scotland has an incredible history of internationalism, which has been going on for 200 years. I think that that is true, because in many ways Scotland has probably influenced the rest of the world more than any other country that I can think of.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh is a long-established and well-respected body with a lot of history. I have looked at the RSE's priorities, and "Towards a New Enlightenment" is a wonderful motto to have. How is that strategy going? What can the Scottish Government or Parliament do to help with it? Have you found it easier or more difficult to develop your strategy since devolution?

Gordon Adam: Those are good questions. First, the "Towards a New Enlightenment" strategy is important for us. The Royal Society of Edinburgh was created in 1783 from the first European enlightenment, and the likes of David Hume and Adam Smith were involved in its creation. Many of the great inventors and innovators throughout the past 200-odd years have been fellows of the society, and we look to that tradition.

We know that we are a small country, but we punch above our weight because of the ideas that we come up with. That is why the likes of China want to talk to us in Scotland and are keen to have links with us on the research side, because they know the quality of what they get in Scotland—that aspect is important.

As regards what devolution has done for us, about 40 per cent of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's funding comes from the Scottish Government through the SFC. We have moved around a bit, but the SFC understands what the RSE is trying to do, which helps an awful lot. Working closely with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government is important for us and I want to develop that further over the coming years.

Roderick Campbell: I have a brief question on the point about the importance of international human rights that we discussed a few minutes ago. My perception of the UK Government's position is not that it is against human rights but that it wants to repatriate them. Can Mr Adamson put the case for looking at human rights in an international context?

Bruce Adamson: Yes. Your starting premise is entirely right, in that the UK has been one of the key drivers of improvements in human rights and the creation of an international human rights framework. UK lawyers and politicians were involved in drafting almost all our international standards, which is why it is particularly worrying when we see a shift in position and a move away from one of the key principles of human rights, which is universality. We cannot pick and choose in human rights, because everyone, by nature of being human, has human rights—they are interrelated and interdependent. The idea of picking and choosing between human rights undermines the basic principle that we are all human.

There are massive concerns domestically about sending a message that some people or issues do not matter in terms of human rights, and there are

huge concerns about projecting that message internationally. If the country that has such a strong history of human rights protection moves backwards on that, it sends a message to other countries that do not have such strong human rights records that it is okay for them to move backwards.

There are concerns in particular about comments that have been made on aspects such as the European Court of Human Rights, where the UK has taken a position not to implement decisions. Countries such as Russia, Turkey and others with significant numbers of judgments against them do not say to the court that they will not follow those decisions; they just take a long time to discuss the matter, pay money to individuals and do not really change things. For a high-contracting party to the European convention on human rights to say that it will not follow the rules that it has agreed to sends a very negative message that creates danger not just in the UK but around the world.

The Convener: Does that answer your question, Rod?

Roderick Campbell: Yes, thank you.

The Convener: We have used up all the time that we have this morning; we have discussed topics that we have exercised well. I thank all the witnesses for their contributions and I offer the same invitation to you as to the previous witnesses, which is that, if you have any other comments, resolutions to problems or ideas, please feed them through to the committee and we will endeavour to do the best with them that we can. I thank you all for coming.

"Brussels Bulletin"

11:21

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the "Brussels Bulletin". I suggest that, unless anybody has a burning issue to raise, we simply note the bulletin and make our other committee colleagues aware of it.

That concludes the meeting, and I thank committee members for their attendance. I will see you all on 4 June.

Meeting closed at 11:22.

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